

Parābhava Sutta

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It was the intention of the Buddha, Sakyamuni Gotama, soon after his enlightenment, to dispatch his first batch of the liberated sixty disciples, each one going singly on his own way, to preach the newly discovered **Dhamma** for the welfare and well-being of the entire world - *bahujana-hitāya bahujana-sukhāya atthāya hitāya devamanussānaṃ*. The world of the Buddha never had chosen people, no *persona grata*, whom he favoured over and above others.

On the other hand, the world both of gods and men looked up to him for guidance to work out their success in life, and to gain their final salvation. For the Buddha was their chosen guide and instructor - *satthā devamanussānaṃ*. We have already referred to in an earlier essay dealing with the **Maṅgala Sutta** [PARITTAS - FOR EDUCATION & CULTURE Published by Buddhist Cultural Centre 2003] that all beings in the universe, including the extra-terrestrial or *devā*, wanted to know from the Buddha as to what really generated success [*maṅgalāni*] in lives of people in the world - *bahū devā manussā ca maṅgalāni acintayum*. = Many gods and men speculated as to what generates success in their lives.

Fully sensitive to the presence in the world of **failure** as the invariable complement of **success**, the Buddha appears to have been asked by the same interrogators who inquired about success as to what brings about failure or one's downfall in life - *kiṃ parābhavato mukhaṃ*. It is not to be forgotten that all religious instructions begin at the level of men and women of the world. The average thinking pattern of the world is unmistakably gross and mundane. It is such thinking which contributes to the material productivity of life in the world.

It is true that man shall not live by bread alone. But it is also true at the same

time that he needs it for his sustenance [*sabbe sattā āhāraṭṭhikā* = All life is founded on some form of subsistence or food - *āhāra*] and that he has to earn it himself by fair means. That is why Buddhism goes to great lengths in dealing with means and modes of acquiring the wherewithal which makes the lives of humans on earth acceptably rich and comfortable [*sukhī attānaṃ pariharanti* = Make their lives happy and comfortable].

This brings into the basic teachings of early Buddhism a great wealth of social philosophy which prepares the average worldling to undertake his stupendous religious journeying to reach his spiritual goal of Nirvana by putting his house in order here and now. In his admonitions to the people of the world, the Buddha therefore has to refer to a great many problems of day to day life. These are down-to-earth realities of early Buddhist teachings which have essentially sociological relevance like family relationships, domestic harmony, economic justifiability, community development etc.

No Buddhist scholarship, with whatsoever sophistication, needs to run away from these nor to stigmatize these as being too rustic or clay-footed. Or believe that the Buddha would not delve into such commonplace themes. Or argue that a Buddha does not need to appear in the world to instruct on these. Buddhism does not need to be made to look supersonic with super-dharma approaches or metaphysical interpretations and elaborations. Let us diligently keep out of Buddhist studies such attempts to filter these original down-to-earth realistic teachings through layers of imaginary and mysterious metaphysical strainers. We fail to see any justification, apart from being trendy with the rest of the community, for these supersonic flights and their newly delineated alliances and alignments as transcendental teachings or *paramattha-desanā*.

Let us now turn our attention to the sutta under discussion, namely the **Parābhava**. The word *parābhava* itself means decline, deterioration, i.e. the downfall of a human, man or woman, as a social being. The genesis of the sutta,

that is how the sutta came to be preached by the Buddha, is structured in the same pattern as that of the **Maṅgala**. Beings of the universe, including the extra-terrestrial, referred to as *devā*, are said to be interested in this problem of decline or *parābhava*. As for the *devas* as participants in this episode, it would have made very little sense at that time, quite contrary to the wisdom of some modern students of Buddhism today, both monks and laymen, to refer to these beings as classes of extra-privileged humans.

The sutta begins by saying that it is the conformity to norms of approved good behaviour [*dhamma-kāmo*] that leads to progress and well-being while rejection of such norms [*dhamma-dess*] leads to decline and deterioration. We must immediately turn our attention to the word **dhamma** in this context. As we examine in detail the causes that lead to inevitable decline in society, we cannot but be impressed by the social considerations which are reflected regarding the security of the individual, community and the larger social organization of the world. Amazingly they are all within the scope of the said **dhamma**.

An unmistakable choice of the wild, disorderly and unjust [*asaṭ*] marks the beginning of decline. Slothful, lethargic, unenterprising and lost in the crowds [*sabhāsī*] one is said to be prone to decline and perish. As the fourth item in the list, the sutta brings up the care and maintenance of parents by children, by children who have the capacity to do so [*pahusanti na bharat*]. Buddhist teachings bring up this issue of **mātā-pitu-upaṭṭhāna** [attending on one's mother and father] and **mātāpetti-bhara** [supporting one's parents] again and again as a basis for the growth of human culture and that as a stepping stone on the path of Nibbanic aspirations. It is emphatically stated that an upholder of such virtues is called a **sappurisa** [*mātāpettibharam jantum ... āhu sappuriso iti* = a person who supports his parents... is called a man of virtue.].

It seems most illogical to agree with those exponents of the **Essence Of Buddhism** or **Paramattha Desanā** who choose to say that the "Buddha was not

born to this world, after having perfected the ten-fold preparations for many thousand eons, for the purpose of teaching the world a generally accepted fundamental social obligation of this nature or to vindicate the veracity of the established ethics of the society." This, we believe, far from upgrading it, leads to serious derailment of Buddhism.

Closely following on parental care comes the respectful behaviour towards one's religious clergy in society. They are indeed considered as part of the regular society. They are not to be cheated on any account - *musāvādena vañceti*. Conscientious recognition and productive and fruitful generosity towards fellow members of one's own community seem to rank high as contributing towards the harmonious integration of society. Strictly individualistic enjoyment of possessions or *eko bhujati sādūni* is severely frowned upon. Respect for one's communal groups is upheld as a virtue for strengthening social solidarity.

Addiction or being addicted to women, wine and gambling is equally censured as a serious cause of social degradation and downfall. It primarily eats into one's economic resources and continually drains away one's earnings [= *laddhaṃ laddhaṃ vināseti*].

Healthy marital relations within the community, without any violation to conjugal fidelity and domestic harmony is viewed with adequate seriousness. It is finally hinted at that whosoever aspires to be a ruler of the land must be a person of adequate economic resources. In the absence of such security, a head of state is apparently driven to seek alliances with vicious and unwholesome bargaining groups who promise to support a weak and tottering aspirant to political leadership. Herein lies the wisdom of ancient social and political philosophy of the Buddha.